

Opinion

Ethics training: Why bother?



By Vincent J. Faggioli
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This October, all Honolulu Engineer District employees received an hour of Ethics training presented by the Office of Counsel. In the past, only those who were required to file OGE Form 450 or 450A - about 1/3 of the District - were mandated to attend this training and, in some cases, this training was by computer-assisted learning rather than in-person. This year, it was decided that EVERYBODY in the District could benefit from in-person Ethics training.

But, we have had so much training already, to include leadership, ergonomics, safety, Consideration of Others, stress reduction, pre-retirement seminars, resume writing, and many others. Is ethics really necessary? After all, it takes each of us away from our work for an hour.

However, training is a wonderful benefit of Federal employment. When I was an Infantry Officer we had a training motto - please excuse this homely reversion to a past life - "The one thing you can't do with a bayonet is sit on it." That is, we can have all the weapons and tools, but unless we know how to use them, they are useless. Training teaches us how to use the weapons at our disposal, in this case our high ethical standards, individually and as a nation.

I am firmly of the opinion that no training is more important than the Ethics training that each of us has received. "Why is that?" you may ask. It is because individually and collectively, we as Federal employees are obligated to perform our duties in fulfillment of a public trust. The American people have hired us to do a job and fulfillment of that function requires us to act in their name with honor and courage. The Declaration of Independence of the United States clearly explains an important truth: the purpose of Government is to secure our rights, and that "Governments are instituted among Men, deriving their just powers from the consent of the Governed."

We serve at the will of the American people, with their consent. To retain their confidence and trust, rules have been established to illuminate our footsteps on the path of stewardship. These rules are the rules of Ethics and their derivative Standards of Conduct.

We have discussed in detail with you the rules pertaining to financial disclosure, prohibitions against acting in violation of conflict of interest laws and regulations, gift rules, the necessity of impartiality, the importance of exercising honorable stewardship over our Federal position and government property that comes along with that position, limitations on outside positions and the program for answering Ethics questions. These subjects may not have been titillating or scintillating, but they are very important for you to understand and obey.

However, I strongly believe that, as important as these individual rules are, it is even more important to have a strong ethical compass that dictates correct behavior when a rule does not strictly forbid a questionable act. Every day, and every minute of that day, we should have the courage and the fortitude to do the right thing for the right reasons. That is the central focus of Ethics and ethical theory.

Doing one's ethical duty takes courage. Courage and courageous acts depend a lot on circumstances. One act of courage and service I have always marveled at was that of Chaplain Herman Felhoelter, who was killed in the Korean War.

Following an attack and a retreat, Chaplain Felhoelter refused to leave those who lay wounded, still alive. A sergeant watching from another hill through his field glasses saw Felhoelter get shot in the back of the head while he was kneeling over wounded soldiers, praying for them. We have recently witnessed similar deeds of courage, heroism, and service to others during and since September 11th. Duty has many different manifestations and may be dependent upon circumstances.

Few of us are called upon to make such sacrifices in "doing the right thing." However, we too can be courageous by strictly abiding by the rules.

In his initial communication with his staff and Federal workers, President George W. Bush wrote: "Everyone who enters into public service for the United States has a duty to the American people to maintain the highest standards of integrity in Government." By recognizing and abiding by high standards of personal conduct we do the right thing and demonstrate personal ethics. It may seem a little thing, but if we are to be trusted by the American people, we must earn that trust each and every day.

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— Vincent J. Faggioli

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